New wave retail theatre

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Turning shopping into an immersive, multisensory experience has been much vaunted as a way in which bricks-and-mortar stores can compete in an increasingly online retail landscape. And to truly stand out, one company is taking the retail theater concept to new heights, blurring the boundaries between art, commerce, and experience.
Showfields opened as a retail meets gallery space in late 2018, in NoHo, New York City, with a self-described mission to “engage and inspire your sense of discovery through revolving experiences with the brands and communities shaping our future.” The 14,707-square-foot, next-generation department store offers independent and online brands—among them Boodles Gin and Nuria Beauty—a backdrop against which to showcase their wares, for a monthly subscription fee. For summer 2019, rather than offering a mere shopping experience, Showfields imbued retail with a dramatic twist.

The House of Showfields is described on its website as “an immersive theater experience that bridges art and retail.” Guests are taken on a tour, which starts by going down a black-and-white striped slide, and
are guided around immersive worlds that set products alongside works of art. Actors—including one character named Miss Amelia Showfields—demonstrate the products within this otherworldly environment. At the end of the tour, guests can buy the products they’ve seen at a dedicated shopping space called The Lab.

And the focus is the experience itself, rather than creating an Instagram image. Writing in Fast Company, Katharine Schwab said Showfields “is hoping that the stories behind the brands and the characters will give the fun, immersive show more depth than a flat Instagrammable wall.”

Hudson Yards in New York City, with its cluster of dramatic skyscrapers, is also emblematic of this awe-inspiring form of retail. When Neiman Marcus opened at Hudson Yards in March 2019, the store’s CEO Geoffroy van Raemdonck told Forbes: “The reason (to come) is not to say ‘what I’m going to buy’ but ‘what I am going to experience.’” To that end, the store’s services span an in-house aesthetician, a shoe-shine and cobbler, and embroidery, hand-painting, and laser-printing services for garments.

Selfridges’ founder Harry Gordon Selfridge was one of the originators of retail theater, and the store continues to evolve that concept today. Recent 2019 activations at its London store include a concession for Depop, the social media meets second-hand retail app, alongside a Project Ocean Beauty Booth that ran during June, highlighting ways to reduce and recycle bathroom products. And in July, Chanel took over the store’s Fount Bar, to mark the launch of the brand’s J12 watch.

Pressure is no doubt growing on bricks-and-mortar retail. Barneys entered Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in August 2019, while the Guardian reports that some Manhattan neighborhoods have store vacancy rates of 25%, with 12,000 stores forecast to close in the US this year. Against this dampened mood, the most inventive retailers are striving to create unmissable experiences that will compel consumers to make an IRL pilgrimage to their stores.

Main image: Showfield. Photography by Eitan Gamlieli

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